

THERE was an air of gloom around Loakes Park at 3.48 pm on Saturday afternoon. Referee Mr Smith had just blown his whistle for half-time and Wycombe Wanderers players were trooping off the field with heads bowed.

Long-standing supporters shook their heads as if to say 'It's not like the good old days', bewildered experts expressed doubts as to Wycombe's title chances this season and bemoaned the injury to striker Stewart Atkins.

The reason for this despondency was that Wycombe trailed 1-0 to Tooting and Mitcham despite forcing the pace for 80 per cent of the first half. While Blues found the Tooting defence impenetrable, the visitors stole upfield to grab the lead against the run of play.

It looked like a repeat of Slough's victory the previous Tuesday night and Blues fans did not like it. Yet half an hour later, the mood had changed completely and Wycombe were cruising to a 3-1 victory, which would move them up to sixth spot in the Berger Isthmian League table.

Wycombe Wanderers 3, Tooting and Mitcham 1

Report by MICHAEL KNOX

This transformation had been brought about by two goals from Steve Long and another brilliant effort by Dylan Evans and by the end of the match, Blues were positively looking forward to their visit to Hayes tonight (Tuesday).

But to return to the start. Blues made three changes to the team that began the game against Slough. Steve Long, now fully fit, came in for Derek Harris, while Keith Mead and Howard Kennedy, who have been nursing groin strains during the past week were replaced by Steve Hardwick and John Priestley.

NO CHALLENGE

This was Hardwick's first competitive game for Wycombe. The former Altrincham centre-back gave a fine performance although his heading lacked authority at times.

However, one of the snags about changing centre-backs combinations, is that they can take time to settle down, and it was a misunderstanding between Hardwick and Alan Phillips that enabled Tooting to take a shock lead in the 36th minute.

Until then Wycombe had dominated the match but from a long ball upfield Tooting midfielder Bobby Green raced

clear. Phillips and Hardwick each expected the other to make the challenge.

This gave Green all the room and time he needed to send an excellent shot into the top right hand corner of the goal with John Maskell well beaten.

LONG EQUALISES

Blues tried in vain to equalise before the break but all their efforts came to naught against a solid nine man defence. Better use of the flanks might have created more chances but Blues were still behind until 10 minutes into the second half.

For once the Tooting defence was outnumbered as Paul Birdseye's cross was nodded on by Mick Holifield to the unmarked Long, who headed firmly home.

The Tooting defence started to cave in and it was from a free-kick 35 yards out that led to Wycombe's next goal three minutes later. Davies chipped the ball to Dylan Evans, who controlled it and turned sharply before finding the top right hand corner of the net from 20 yards.

It was a goal to remember for Evans, who turned in another lively performance to confound his critics. This season he seems

to have been given a new lease of life.

There was no stopping the rampant Wanderers now as Tooting began to lose their tempers. Colin Woffinden was booked for dissent, and later must have been perilously close to being sent off after upending Holifield.

Wycombe's third goal in the 68th minute had a tinge of luck attached to it. Holifield's mis-kicked corner found Priestley on the edge of the area. Priestley skewed his attempted shot at goal and the ball somehow found Long who planted the ball past goalkeeper Garry Sproul.

Sproul had a shaky game but did well to prevent Long completing his hat-trick in the 77th minute, when he blocked Long's clear shot. The rebound went to Evans whose effort bounced to safety off another defender. This save prevented Wycombe gaining their second £40 bonus.

One disturbing feature of Blues display was the poor form of forward Terry Scott, who appears to be out of his depth. He was replaced in the 86th minute by Derek Harris — not before time.

Wycombe: J. Maskell, P. Birdseye, R. Davies, S. Hardwick, A. Phillips, D. Allanson, J. Priestley, M. Holifield, D. Evans, S. Long, T. Scott (sub. D. Harris, 86 mins).

Tooting: G. Sproul, A. Berrechio, K. Highland, R. Pittaway, R. Green, D. Casey, D. Juneman, C. Woffinden, D. Denis, A. Ives, J. Keefe. Sub. T. Ford (not used).

Referee: R. Smith (Middle Barton, Oxon).

Half-time: 0-1. **Scorers:** Wycombe — Long (55 mins, 68), Evans (58); Tooting — Green (36).
Attendance: 1,150.